

# What Becomes of the Avant-Guarded? New Music as Subculture

## Que devient l'avant-garde ? La nouvelle musique comme sous-culture

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Article abstract

In a short 'vox pop,' written for *Circuit* in 2010, on the subject of the 'future' of new music, I proposed that new music — or the version of it tightly intertwined with what was once thought of as the international avant-garde, at any rate — might today be better thought of as a sort of subculture, akin to the spectacular subcultures of goth and punk, but radically different in that they developed from the 'grassroots,' as it were, while new music comes from a position of extreme cultural privilege, which is to say it has access, even now, to modes of funding and infrastructure subcultures 'proper' never have. This essay develops this line of enquiry, outlining theories of subculture and post-subculture — drawing on 'classic' and more recent research, from Hebdige and Cohen to Hodgkinson, Maffesoli, and Thornton — before presenting the, here more detailed, case that new music represents a sort of subculture, before making some tentative proposals regarding what sort of subculture it is and what this might mean for contemporary understandings of new music and what it is for.

# What Becomes of the Avant-Guarded? New Music as Subculture

Martin Iddon

*Publicly calling myself a homosexual, a thief, a traitor, and a coward exposed me and put me in a situation where I could not sleep peacefully or create work that was easily assimilated by society. In short, by making all this noise, which was bound to get the attention of the media, I put myself from the beginning in a position that made it very difficult for society to know what to do with me.*

— Jean Genet<sup>1</sup>

*[T]here are only subcultures.*

— Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston<sup>2</sup>

## I

In a brief contribution to *Circuit's* 2010 'Enquête sur l'avenir de la musique contemporaine,' I posited the idea that 'new music' had become — or was well on the way to becoming — subcultural.<sup>3</sup> The present essay attempts to develop further what that intuition might mean. Nevertheless, what is presented here remains speculative, but I hope that some of what appears here may seem a plausible theoretical explanation for certain features of the new music scene, such that further necessary empirical work might be undertaken by a future researcher.

The initial impetus for the intuition that lies at the heart of that earlier position paper and of what follows here came from research I undertook while developing a course entitled 'Goth Rock and Gothic Subculture.' As a part of that work, I read Paul Hodkinson's seminal *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture*, the opening of which situates Hodkinson as observer-participant through a rich description of his own experience of attending the Whitby Gothic Weekend in October 1998.<sup>4</sup> The very opening of this description gives the flavour of the whole and, as such, deserves quotation at some length:

1. Genet, [1964]2004, p. 2.

2. Halberstam and Livingston, 1995, p. 4.

3. It should be noted that, although at the time of writing I had not encountered an earlier usage, this thought was not an original one. As early as 2004, Jean E. Burgess had made related speculations in her MRes thesis, "High Culture as Subculture: Brisbane's Contemporary Chamber Music Scene" (University of Queensland). That study, however, was, as its title suggests significantly more tightly focussed (and significantly more empirically grounded) than the present essay.

4. Hodkinson, 2002, p. 1-3.

A car pulls up outside my home in the English city of Birmingham on a rainy Friday morning at the end of October 1998. The long black hair of its occupants informs me that this is my lift. I run outside toward the car, using my rucksack to shield my recently dyed and crimped purple and pink streaked hair from the rain. The tall, slim, male driver, wearing eye-liner and dressed up in tight black jeans and a purple velvet shirt, gets out and helps make space for my luggage in the back of the car, among numerous other bags and various pairs of black boots. We get into the car, and I am greeted by the three female passengers, and immediately recognize the familiar sound of one of my favourite bands, The Mission, on the stereo. We are five goths on our way to spend a weekend with over a thousand other goths in a small North Yorkshire seaside town.<sup>5</sup>

5. Hodkinson, 2002, p. 1.

As the description continues, the reader learns of Hodkinson's advance preparation, both practical — the purchase of tickets for the weekend from the organizer, Jo Hampshire (unnamed in Hodkinson's account), a "goth enthusiast and entrepreneur,"<sup>6</sup> the event having been advertised through specialist media — and social, through discussions and anticipation online and at goth events locally, with excitement focussed both on being amongst the like-minded and catching up with old friends with shared interests. The journey to Whitby is, in part, an extension of this discussion, enthusiastically discussing the qualities of the bands at the weekend, alongside question of personal dress and the weather,<sup>7</sup> all the while engaged in

6. *Ibid.*

7. At the event described, the more famous goth bands in attendance were the US group Sunshine Blind and the UK's Rosetta Stone, as well as the well-known The Sisters of Mercy cover band, The Sisters of Murphy.

'goth-spotting,' a game which entails looking out for cars full of fellow enthusiasts heading for the same destination. We overtake and wave knowingly at two such groups during the journey, and spot several others at a motorway service station. Although a certain shyness seems to prohibit approaching and speaking to them, we communicate, with the exchange of glances, a clear sense of our shared identity, an amusement about the reactions of other travellers to our collective presence and a knowingness about our common destination.<sup>8</sup>

8. Hodkinson, 2002, p. 1-2.

On arrival in Whitby, Hodkinson and friends "join in this temporary occupation" of the town, joining those who are recognisably — through dress, make-up, and body modification — part of the goth community in a "ritual get-together," mingling with those known from home or from previous events as well as making new contacts within the subculture, including those who have travelled from abroad.<sup>9</sup> The 'main event' is a social one, involving "the live performance by bands from Britain, Scandinavia and the United States, which, though virtually unheard of outside the goth scene, are well known in countries across the world within it."<sup>10</sup> A network of specialist record labels (and specialist distributors) — many of whom are in attendance, selling their wares, at the events of the weekend — have ensured that members of the community have been able to get to know the music performed by these outfits.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

These are joined by other largely independent, enthusiast-run producers of gothware — principally fanzines, clothes, and make-up — and promoters of gigs elsewhere. Ultimately, attendees will report on the events of the weekend, both to friends who were unable to make the trip to Whitby and to the broader community in the form of online reviews and reflections on Internet discussion forums and listservs. As Hodgkinson honestly admits, “[a]t the same time as being a celebration of shared identity, this is something of a competition with a distinct, if complex set of rules.”<sup>11</sup>

11. Hodgkinson, 2002, p. 2.

## II

At first glance, a comparison between new music and goth might be thought unlikely, save that the musics of both are enthusiastically received by only a relatively small group of listeners. In any case, new music is certainly not spectacular in the sense that the gothic subculture is, which is to say it does not exhibit the same visual presence as goth — or for that matter the ‘classic’ subcultures of punk, skinheads, mods, or teds — a fact which, one might imagine, rules out my thesis *tout court*. After all, Dick Hebdige’s foundational text, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), could hardly be any less ambiguous, in its claim that “[c]ertain semiotic facts are undeniable. The punk subculture, like every other youth culture, was constituted in a series of spectacular transformations of a whole range of commodities, values, common-sense attitudes, etc.”<sup>12</sup> While there might seem to be some sort of proximity between Hebdige’s assertion that “[s]ubcultures represent ‘noise’ (as opposed to sound)” and the sorts of musics familiar from the vantage point of new music, Hebdige is sure that the (albeit temporary) ‘blockage’ that results in the system of representation is a product of the “signifying power of the spectacular subculture”.<sup>13</sup> That said, the very fact that Hebdige describes the spectacular here as a *species* of subculture, even if the only one he focuses on, suggests there may be other sorts of subculture where the game is played according to slightly different rules (or, perhaps better, with slightly different pieces). Lewin and Williams, too, complain that even those more recent scholars who purport to have overcome many of the more obvious flaws in Hebdige’s theory still overemphasize style and, as a result, have “fetishized material culture and its consumption as indispensable dimensions of youth subculture.”<sup>14</sup> I shall myself return to the fetishisation of youth presently.

12. Hebdige, [1979]2005, p. 116.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

14. Lewin and Williams, 2009, p. 68.

That notion of subculture as noise, considered more broadly, however, surely does have, as Stahl describes it,

15. Stahl, [2003]2006, p. 27.

16. Genet, [1964]2004, p. 14.

17. Genet, [1949]2009, p. 16.

18. Cohen, [1972]2005, p. 89.

19. Hebdige, [1979]2005, p. 132-133.

a deep, romantic and poetic resonance for many scholars. The heroic rhetoric of resistance, the valorization of the underdog and outsider, and the reemergence of a potentially political working-class consciousness are all embedded in discourses that have shaped the theorization of subcultures in the past twenty years. [...] The sartorial splendour of teds, mods, rockers and punks became emblematic of a 'semiotic guerrilla warfare', which took objects from the dominant culture and transformed their everyday naturalized meaning into something spectacular and alien. Style became a form of resistance.<sup>15</sup>

In this sense, Hebdige's heroic subcultures map directly onto Genet's description of his conception of the meaning of his own homosexuality. Beyond or alongside sex with the men Genet slept with — a fact that, to be sure, he does not suggest is at all secondary or marginal in terms of meaningfulness — he suggests he “tried to recreate with them the adventure I had, an adventure whose symbol is illegitimacy, betrayal, the refusal of society, and finally writing, that is, the return to society by other means.”<sup>16</sup> It is hardly surprising in such a context that, at the very beginning of *Subculture*, Hebdige recounts the beginning of Genet's more-or-less autobiographical *The Thief's Journal* (1949), where a tube of Vaseline is confiscated by the Spanish authorities, identifying Genet to them as homosexual and subject to the policemen's “revenge, their hatred, their contempt” but becomes, for Genet “the sign of a secret grace which was soon to save me from contempt.”<sup>17</sup> Necessarily, even in Genet's position, the transformation of an everyday object into an apotropaic charm which can turn away contempt relies upon some sort of mainstream, the ‘parent culture,’ as Cohen amongst others described it, in which “the latent function of subculture is this: to express and resolve, albeit ‘magically,’ the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture.”<sup>18</sup> In this sense, subcultures become in Hebdige's hands fundamentally about some sort of heroic winning of space for marginal, expressive forms which express “a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives.”<sup>19</sup>

Just as Hebdige finds in his spectacular subcultures that certain effects are produced by the transformation of everyday objects, through a process of self-determined alienation, into magical ones — a tube of Vaseline, a safety pin “warn the ‘straight’ world in advance of a sinister presence” — the *reaction* of the ‘legitimate’ world is one which might ring true from the experiences of watching subcultural outsiders — which might be to say, without getting ahead of my argument too far, those who encounter a piece of new music sandwiched between the concerto and symphony they *actually* came to see and hear — encountering this unfamiliar, uncomfortable music: “vague

suspensions, uneasy laughter, ‘white and dumb rages’.”<sup>20</sup> These same objects, even if imaginary objects as in the case of music, “become signs of forbidden identity, sources of value.”<sup>21</sup>

Hebdige is no less clear that subcultures are more closely related to ‘culture’ than to *Kultur*. They “cannot be adequately or usefully described as ‘art of a high degree.’”<sup>22</sup> This might perhaps be initially seen as a major objection to any claim that new music could possibly operate as a subculture: if it has any genealogy, it is a heritage which surely takes in Bach and Beethoven as founding fathers at the very least. Nevertheless, Hebdige nuances the point in ways which might prove more productive. The sort of high art Hebdige has in mind is one which would categorise its products “as timeless objects, judged by the immutable criteria of traditional aesthetics,” while the sort of culture he thinks any subculture worthy of the name exhibits operates “as systems of communication, forms of expression and representation” conforming to a broader anthropological definition of culture as “coded exchanges of reciprocal messages.” Where Hebdige’s high art is eternal and transcendent, his subcultural art is characterised by “‘appropriations,’ ‘thefts,’ subversive transformations, as *movement*.”<sup>23</sup>

Alongside the question of spectacularity, Hebdige implicitly stresses a seemingly essential link between youth and subculture. Indeed, in the world of subcultural studies, one might often have the impression that subcultural adherence is just something one does before growing up and becoming a ‘proper’ member of ‘cultured’ society. As Hodkinson notes, this is true even in the case of so sophisticated a researcher as Sarah Thornton, as exemplified in her claim that “going to dance clubs is an integral part of growing up. It is a rite of passage which marks adolescent independence,”<sup>24</sup> continuing to suggest that “enthusiasm to participate lasts only until the post-youth establishment of domestic self-sufficiency and long-term partnerships.”<sup>25</sup> For those who continue to participate beyond this ‘appropriate’ age, in such a social world, the correct reaction would indeed be to demand of them that they ‘grow up.’ Hodkinson’s view is considerably more sophisticated: he claims that

enduring participation in youth cultures rarely should be understood as a simple retention of adolescence, less still a rejection of adulthood. On the contrary, participants typically negotiate their subcultural commitment with the development of identities, bodies, priorities and orientations which differentiate them from younger participants, including their former selves.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, as Alexis Petridis notes in a recent essay for *The Guardian*, where youth subcultures are concerned, “[y]ou hardly need a degree in sociology

20. Hebdige, [1979]2005, p. 3. ‘White and dumb rages’ is drawn from the passage from Genet quoted by Hebdige.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Sarah Thornton, quoted in Hodkinson, 2013, p. 13.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

27. Petridis, 2014, online.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Ueno, [2003]2006, p. 101.

30. Thornton, [1995]2005, p. 191.

to realise that something fairly dramatic has happened to them over the past couple of decades.” Whereas in the mid-1980s of Petridis’s secondary education (and mine too, as it happens) there were goths, metallers, punks, soulboys “all of them defined by the music they liked, all of them more or less wearing their tastes on their sleeves,” in contemporary Britain, Petridis contends, “the only real teenage cults visible to an outsider, displaying their allegiances by their manner of dress, seem to be metalheads and emos” and, furthermore, “[t]he latter seems to have co-opted elements of most of the other spectacular subcultures — goth, metal, punk and indie — under one catch-all term.”<sup>27</sup> His conclusion is striking. The idea of youth subcultures which flourished in the twentieth-century is “outmoded.” “The internet doesn’t spawn mass movements, bonded together by a shared taste in music, fashion and ownership of subcultural capital: it spawns brief, microcosmic ones.”<sup>28</sup>

### III

In truth, Petridis aligns himself, knowingly or not, with some aspects of post-subcultural thought, in relatively orthodox manner. More than ten years ago — and in an essay surveying the decade *before that* — Toshiya Ueno raised questions which suggested that a more sophisticated version of subcultural theory than Hebdige’s might make it possible to come to the realisation that a more diverse range of practices could properly be considered subcultural. Ueno focussed on the rave culture of the 1990s, observing that the central notions of subculture Hebdige-style — “moral panic, homology, magical solutions to social contradictions and so forth” — failed to map onto the rave scene because rave was never a working-class phenomenon and was, by extension, never an “alternative expression of class struggle.” Indeed, rave was arguably broadly apolitical in outlook. As a consequence, rave was not, unlike punk, a way of resisting the cultural mainstream through ritual,<sup>29</sup> notwithstanding Thornton’s observation that “[t]he vast majority of clubbers and ravers distinguish themselves against the mainstream which, to some degree, can be seen to stand in for the masses—the discursive distance from which is a measure of a clubber’s cultural worth.”<sup>30</sup> To be clear: to question the necessary relationship between subculture and class struggle is not to say that a subculture does not hold itself at a distance from a particular conception of the mainstream, nor that that distance is not significant in just the way that Thornton proposes. It is to say that, by contrast, such a position may be held and still be subcultural even if the symbolic return to the parent culture, having heroically (or magically) resolved its contradictions, is neither desired

nor conceivable. Subcultures may well still re-interpret — have an intimate relationship with — the ‘parent culture,’ but need not desire any symbolic resolution which involves any form of reintegration at all. Indeed, the persistent retention of that distance, occupying a state which can comment on the mainstream but not be co-opted by it, might be regarded as an ideal position from some perspectives.

It is in this sense, perhaps, that one might effect a reconsideration of the sorts of heroism that are possible in subcultural terms or, at any rate, the ways in which the idea of heroic winning of space helps to structure the subcultural space itself. Marchart regards the idea that a strict demarcation may in all cases be held to exist between some sort of ‘mainstream’ and the subcultural subject position to be a fallacious one, not least because, if there truly is a mainstream as such, the anti-co-optation position “underestimates the extend of multi-faceted collaboration between the seemingly small world of subculture and big business”.<sup>31</sup> Further, however, there may not even really exist anything one could realistically term a mainstream. Moreover, Marchart reiterates and develops Thornton’s notion that “[t]here is no intrinsic resistant or subversive quality to subcultures,” at least to the extent that there is no reason to believe that “subordinate cultural groups act subversively or counter-hegemonically simply *by virtue* of their subordinate position.”<sup>32</sup> From Marchart’s perspective, then, the degree to which subcultures are political is actually a relatively minor one — micro- rather than macro-political — and capable of expressing only oblique (which is to say, in Marchart’s terms indirect and probably ineffective) political challenge.<sup>33</sup> What remains in such a situation is the *form* of a heroic, marginalised position, where marginalisation — the inability to effect change — is a guarantor of heroism. As Marchart summarises the position,

a term like *sell out* is directed against those members of the subordinate group who dare to change sides, thereby acting like ‘traitors’ to the cause of subcultural resistance. In all cases the ‘heroic’ term is the subordinated one, and it remains heroic as long as it *resists* any movement towards the dominant term.<sup>34</sup>

One might note a striking structural similarity between this situation and the archetypal avant-garde paradox wherein “to be successful, that is popular, denotes failure; to fail, which is to be generally derided, is a clear mark that one is moving in the correct direction.”<sup>35</sup> It would also follow from such argumentation that the 1% too would represent a form of subculture, albeit of a very special and particular kind.

31. Marchart, [2003]2006, p. 85.

32. *Ibid.* My italics.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 85-86.

35. See Iddon, 2008, p. 6.



36. For further details see Maffesoli, [1988]1996, as well as Hodkinson's commentary on it and related issues in Hodkinson, 2002, p. 19-27.

37. Hodkinson, 2002, p. 19-20.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 24-25. See also Finnegan, 1989; Cohen, 1991; and Shank, 1994.

39. Bennett, 2000, p. 84.

40. Kruse, 1993, p. 34.

In any case, such thinking yields an aspect of post-subcultural theory which, in its more extreme versions, emphasises the fluidity and ephemerality of contemporary (sub)cultural groupings, the “brief, microcosmic” movements Petridis suggests have, for Generation Y, replaced subcultures. Often referred to as neo-tribes, these groupings retain some sense of ritual differentiation (or differentiation via ritual) as a way of conceptualising a particular distance from normative modes of behaviour, most especially those of consumption.<sup>36</sup> As Hodkinson summarises Maffesoli's position, it is this relationship with “elective consumption practices” which leads to a “consequent lack of structural anchorage” and, thus, “boundaries are deemed fluid and the consequent ease with which one can opt in or out makes attachment to the grouping highly ephemeral and partial.”<sup>37</sup> Opposed to this, however, is the view that musical neo-tribes have in certain cases retained deep links with a particular local *milieu*. Hodkinson draws attention to studies by Finnegan (who focuses upon amateur music making across a wide range of fields in Milton Keynes), Cohen (who, amongst other issues, examines the ways in which local, primarily amateur Liverpool bands conceptualise their relationship to Liverpool's musical past), and Shanks, whose work may conceivably be regarded as an Austin-based analogue to Cohen's work.<sup>38</sup> Bennett notes that even if neo-tribes are for the most part ephemeral, this is hardly the whole story. They are not “so fluid and transient as to cancel out any form of meaningful interaction with the local environments from which they emerge.”<sup>39</sup> Yet this notion of locality is hardly so simple, especially in the context of an increasingly internet-dominated culture. Even before the Internet's centrality, Kruse's examination of college music suggests that even though Hüsker Dü may be as ineluctably intertwined with Minneapolis as R.E.M. are with Athens, Georgia,

membership in the subculture(s) associated with college music — comprised of musicians, fans, record label owners and employees, record store owners and employees, college radio station disc jockeys and music directors — points to the ways in which alternative music scenes across the United States, and even across the Atlantic are connected rather abstractly through shared tastes — Simon Reynolds has observed, ‘A noise band in Manchester can have more in common with a peer group in Austin, Texas than with one of its “neighbours” two blocks away’ [...] — and quite concretely through social and economic networks.<sup>40</sup>

In some senses, much of post-subcultural thought returns to the arguably more sophisticated (because more flexible) constructions of the sociological work which became subcultural studies *avant la lettre*, but now significantly inflected by the work of Hebdige and the Birmingham Centre

for Contemporary Cultural Studies. In 1946, Green — in an attempt to map etiologies of neuroses — had already emphasised that societal stratification in modern society was made highly complex by virtue of the fact that “no individual participates in the total cultural complex totally but primarily in a series of population segments grouped according to sex, age, class, occupation, region, religion, and ethnic group — all with somewhat differing norms and expectations of conduct”.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, Shibutani concluded that, while people could be categorised according to ‘reference groups’ and those groups were better described as ‘reference worlds’ or ‘social worlds’ — a perspective reminiscent of Gordon’s insistence that worlds within worlds *are still worlds* — it was nevertheless vital to remember that “persons could simultaneously or alternately identify with more than one social world.”<sup>42</sup>

In this sense, again, an earlier formulation probably captures the truth of the matter more clearly than any conception demanding that subcultures must be subcultures ‘proper’ or one arguing that the idea of a subculture in the contemporary world is no longer a plausible one:

Subcultures must exhibit a distinctive enough shape and structure to make them identifiably different from their ‘parent’ culture. They must be focused around certain activities, values, certain uses of material artefacts, territorial spaces etc. which significantly differentiate them from the wider culture. But, since they are sub-sets, there must also be significant things which bind and articulate them with the ‘parent’ culture. [...] Subcultures, therefore, take shape around the distinctive activities and ‘focal concerns’ of groups. They can be loosely or tightly bonded. Some subcultures are merely loosely-defined strands or ‘milieux’ within the parent culture: they possess no distinctive ‘world’ of their own. Others develop a clear, coherent identity and structure.<sup>43</sup>

Therefore, while some of the insights of later revisionist approaches to sub-cultural theory certainly help to refine the theory in potent ways, it does not follow that subcultures are somehow wholly *superseded* by neo-tribes. Rather, it suggests that a conception of subculture which *includes* the possibility of neo-tribal (or even looser, more ephemeral groupings) *alongside* Birmingham-style versions of subculture *and* other versions which investigate the possibility of subcultures not bounded by youth or by class, where the *forms* of earlier subcultures are replicated even if their political edge is partly missing. Such a conception is close to the one deployed by Hodkinson’s examination of goth subculture and may, by way of return to the opening of this essay — after this extensive, but necessary, detour — help explain the intuitive relationship I made between new music and the Whitby Gothic Weekend.

41. Arnold W. Green, quoted in Gordon, [1947]2005, p. 47.

42. See Irwin, [1970]2005, p. 74.

43. Clarke *et al.*, [1975]2005, p. 94.

## IV

Hodkinson's description of the road to Whitby is used by him to do more than simply situate his own credentials as observer-participant. He also demonstrates what he perceives to be the principal features of the late 1990s goth scene in the UK:

It gives a flavour of the strong sense of shared identity held between goths from across and beyond Britain, their relatively consistent adherence to an identifiable range of shared tastes, and their level of practical involvement in the goth scene through friendships, event attendance, consumption practices and even internet use. It also indicates the importance of specialist internal events, media and commercial operations to facilitating the goth scene from within — emphasizing the relative autonomy of the grouping. Such features are taken, by this book, to imply a level of culture *substance*, which might distinguish the goth scene, as a *subculture*, from more fleeting, ephemeral amalgams of young people, music and style.<sup>44</sup>

44. Hodkinson, 2002, p. 7.

In his account, Hodkinson stresses the internal diversity of the scene: 'problem-solving' was a possibility for some, but not all; not all members exhibited the same level of commitment; an oppositional stance to consumer culture was not all-pervading; indeed the persistence of the scene was in part founded on commercial exchange, even if hardly on a big-business model. Yet despite that, Hodkinson argues that

the initial temptation to describe goths using a term such as *neo-tribe* or *lifestyle* was gradually tempered by the realization that such a move would have over-inflated the diversity and instability of their grouping. Crucially, fluidity and substance are not matters of binary opposition, but of degree. In this particular case, the observation that the goth scene involved elements of movement, overlap and change does not somehow obfuscate the remarkable levels of commitment, identity, distinctiveness and autonomy which were evident.<sup>45</sup>

45. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Four characteristics dominate Hodkinson's account, which together form what he terms subcultural *substance*. It is these I suggest map most obviously and directly onto new music, making it possible to conceive of new music as a subculture akin to that of late 1990s British goth. Moreover, as will become clear, these characteristics seem to arise more or less as a consequence of moderations of the positions outlined above. The first of these is *consistent distinctiveness*, which is to say that more-or-less consistent shared tastes and values are shared between subcultural participants which are distinct from those of other groups, but which nonetheless allow for some degree of internal disagreement over relative importance and which can shift over time.<sup>46</sup> The second characteristic is *identity*, which is to say the degree to which

46. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

subcultural participants themselves recognise their group as distinct from other groups, but shared with other participants.<sup>47</sup> The third characteristic is *commitment*, which is to say that subcultural participation would lead to a major impact upon the everyday lives and activities of participants over a period of several years at least. Moreover, “subcultures are liable to account for a substantial proportion of free time, friendship patterns, shopping routes, collections of commodities, going-out habits and even internet use.”<sup>48</sup> It is this characteristic in particular which Hodkinson argues marks the difference between what he regards as a subculture and more ephemeral forms of affiliation. The last characteristic is *autonomy*, which is to say that although a relationship exists with broader society and its political and economic structures, it is nevertheless characterised by a *relatively* high level of autonomy, evidenced by the fact that

a good proportion of the productive or organizational activities which underpin it are liable to be undertaken by and for enthusiasts. Furthermore, in some cases, profit-making operations will run alongside extensive semi-commercial and voluntary activities, indicating particularly high levels of grass-roots insider participation in cultural production.<sup>49</sup>

To explain the relations I see with new music, it may be clearest to return to my own initial experience of reading Hodkinson’s description of Whitby. I was immediately struck by how recognisable almost every aspect of Hodkinson’s description seemed to me, not necessarily because I had any real experience of participation in the goth scene but because of my participation in new music. In short, reading Hodkinson’s description of Whitby Gothic Weekend acted on me as a sort of Althusserian interpellation, in which I recognised my own experiences of, principally, though not only, attending the Darmstadt New Music Courses. There are also kinships with attending, for instance, the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival or the MATA Festival in New York City, or masterclasses run at Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart or at Harvard or in Cortona, Ostrava, or Rieti, or any number of other events dedicated to new music, though the experience is heightened when these events are held in relatively compact settings, much like the town of Whitby. In this sense, it is vital to emphasise that what is presented here is not any sort of ethnography ‘proper.’ It is closer to a description of my own various ‘roads to Whitby.’ The aim is not to come to a definitive conclusion as to whether or not new music is becoming subcultural. Instead it is written in the hope that others will recognise — as I did in reading Hodkinson — aspects of their own experience mirrored in mine, especially in light of the detailed

47. Hodkinson, 2002, p. 30-31.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

description above of the sorts of patterns of behaviours and activities supported by and suspended within other forms of subculture. Even on this relatively superficial level, however, the proximities of these observations to qualities of subcultural substance described by Hodkinson are, I suggest, so striking as to make the hypothesis worthy of further investigation. Another aim of the present essay is, indeed, precisely to provoke further work in this area.

On my first reading of Hodkinson, I noticed immediately the similarity of ‘goth-spotting’ to my own recollection of being *en route* to Darmstadt (or, for that matter, walking around Huddersfield town centre when the festival was on). On the train or bus or tram in Darmstadt itself, I would find myself regularly looking at my fellow passengers, trying to ascertain whether he or she was ‘one of us.’ Perhaps surprisingly, I found myself to be very rarely wrong in my guesswork and seldom simply because of the conspicuous instrument cases. My concern that perhaps this was just something that *I* did — an attempt to find some sort of solidarity with others in order to accommodate my own lack of confidence in the music with which I was engaged — was alleviated to some extent by a conversation with the composer Rick Snow in San Diego, when, unprompted by me, he recalled the first time that he had seen me. Not surprisingly this happened on the train to Darmstadt. We didn’t speak on that occasion, nor do I recall having any item with me that would make me stand out as being a composer (or, for that matter, a musicologist). Nevertheless, Rick was sure that I, like he, was headed for Darmstadt and its New Music Courses.

Certainly, a chance encounter on a train is far from conclusive in identifying the social practices of new music as essentially subcultural. However, it certainly led me to wonder whether this might be a fruitful way of reconsidering the nexus of relationships at play within it, especially in a historical situation where claims to any sort of cultural centrality were already almost impossible to uphold. It is doubtless worth highlighting the ways in which Hodkinson’s description of his own experiences do not map neatly onto what I now regard as the subculture of new music. If these criteria are to be taken as primary, then, to be sure, claims for new music as subculture are seriously flawed. First and foremost, as noted above, new music definitively does not represent a spectacular subculture, of the ilk of the term’s most well-known exemplars. In the cases of punk, the mods, or, for that matter, goth, appearance is of vital significance. Despite the various clichés of ‘new music wear’ — especially black t-shirts and roll necks of various descriptions and jeans — it would be difficult to make a claim that this aspect of stereotypical

subcultures is represented within new music. Nonetheless, careful, detailed ethnographic work would certainly be helpful: new music's dress is hardly some accidental precursor of normcore.<sup>50</sup> For it to be possible to experience the sort of appellation described above, in the absence of any signals beyond proximity in the right geographical milieu and visual markers, it seems highly likely that there are some subtle, indefinable signals enabling a sense of group identity.

Second, at Darmstadt itself (for which one could happily read Witten, or Donaueschingen, or any number of other major festivals), within the pre-organised concerts, the ensembles performing are certainly not semi-professional or amateur. As Hodkinson suggests, part of the way in which subcultural autonomy might be expected to function is precisely in that the activities that lie at the heart of a subculture are for the most part undertaken *by* enthusiasts *for* enthusiasts, with profit-making, professional activities only a minor part of the scene as a whole. Darmstadt — or whichever of the major festivals — can be seen indeed only *as* a minor part of the scene as a whole. As is surely clear from the description of Whitby Goth Weekend, it is there that the most *profitable* activities take place, but that hardly prevents the subculture continuing in between such major events. Thinking only of the events I was personally involved with in recent years — examples include the MATA and Resonant Bodies Festivals in New York City, the New Music Festival at the University of California at San Diego, the Sonic Fusion Festival in Salford, the Festival of New Music at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, or my own institution's Spring New Music Festival — all were organized and run by hugely active, engaged, and dedicated participants in new music, either performing in or having their music performed in those festivals. Moreover, it seems increasingly to be the case that ensembles include composers, whether as performers or artistic directors. This is hardly a new phenomenon: Stockhausen played an active part in performances with his own ensemble from the early 1960s onward and the various minimalist ensembles are well known — from the Philip Glass Ensemble and Steve Reich and Musicians through to the Michael Nyman or Steve Martland Bands — but it seems increasingly normative: Manchester's Distractfold Ensemble is led by Mauricio Pauly and Sam Salem; the Belgian Nadar Ensemble was co-founded by Daan Janssens and has Stefan Prins as a co-artistic director, who is also a member of the Ensemble Nikel side-project, Ministry of Bad Decisions; Sweden's Curious Chamber Players include Malin Bång and Rei Munakata; New York City has, to name just a couple of ensembles, Either/Or, co-directed by Richard Carrick, as well as the loadbang ensemble and

50. It is worth noting that 'normcore' — in the conceptualization of the term developed by the New York-based cool-hunting agency, K-Hole — was expected to be 'about' a recognition almost precisely of a failure of subculture: "The basic idea is that young alternative types had devoted so much energy to trying to define themselves as individuals, through ever-quirkier style flourishes like handlebar mustaches or esoteric pursuits like artisanal pickling, that they had lost the joy of belonging that comes with being part of the group. Normcore was about dropping the pretense and learning to throw themselves into, without detachment, whatever subcultures or activities they stumbled into, even if they were mainstream." Williams, 2014, online.

the Mivos string quartet, who have even played concerts which feature exclusively the music of one another's members. All the above-named individuals are composers. Of course, this is not to say that there are no ensembles where these interests are not intertwined, but it is to note that this is a significant part of the way in which young ensembles are constituting themselves. Moreover, these ensembles are increasingly in evidence, both at major festivals and farther afield and it goes without saying that these ensembles are no more famous outside new music than Rosetta Stone is outside the gothic rock scene, but also no less exciting as a prospect for those within the subculture.

In any case, even at the major festivals, the 'big draw' established performers and ensembles have been specialists for some time. To take only a few examples from recent years, the leading professional ensembles at Darmstadt have been, amongst others, Ensemble Recherche, Ensemble Ascolta, the Arditti Quartet, the Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart, and Ensemble Modern. All are devoted almost exclusively to contemporary, or at least, post-war new music. It should be noted that the funding which makes it possible for these ensembles to *be* professional rather than semi-professional is largely from the state or from charitable foundations with an interest in new music, even if the ensembles do not receive such monies directly. The distinction is precisely what makes the new musical subculture different from more stereotypical subcultures, and doubtless is a significant part both of its particular flavour and why it does not always look *quite* like subcultures traditionally conceived: what distinguishes it in this respect is its heritage as a central part of Western cultures; even though new music is characterised at least in part precisely by its parricidal impulses toward the 'classical' heritage which created the space for it to exist, the way in which it is intertwined with the musical and social histories of that legacy leaves it with continuing aspects of the trappings of it, not least in terms of funding and institutional support. At least one aspect of this may be seen in the degree to which new music retains its centrality in many university and conservatory contexts. Doubtless, such centralised funding is on the wane, as might ultimately be the continuing viability of such ensembles as genuinely professional entities. I do not even believe that this moment is all that far away. Whatever happens, this relationship and the one Cohen describes between subcultures and parent cultures are strikingly similar, even if new music seems likely to resolve contradictions, albeit in a broadly psychoanalytic manner.<sup>51</sup>

For now it might be more fruitful to concentrate on the ways in which new music *does* resemble a subculture in its social character. Even if spectacular tastes, as exhibited by the punk or gothic subcultures, are notably absent,

51. See Iddon, 2013.

taste, in a broader sense, follows a similar paradigm. There is certainly a variety of tastes — a passing remark overheard some years ago is indicative of this: “Would you like some IRCAM sauce with your multiphonics?” — but those tastes are relatively consistent. While one could hardly say that Ferneyhough, or Grisey, or Lachenmann, or Rihm dominates the musical language of new music, it would be likely that European subcultural participants would find a blend of tastes to their liking involving a mix or at least some of the New Complexity, *Neue Einfachheit*, spectralism and *musique concrète instrumentale*. Some might even acknowledge an affinity with certain aspects of American Experimental music, which, a little more distant from the trends central to the European discourse, would doubtless not find favour with all. It might be more accurate to speak not of subculture but of subcultures of new music since one could easily think of various places in Northern America where an identically constructed subculture would exist where this pattern would be reversed, where the names of Alvin Lucier, James Tenney, Pauline Oliveros, and Michael Pisaro might supplant the European luminaries, with a similar grudging acceptance of someone validly appreciating the music of Pierluigi Billone. One might seek some form of corroboration for this hypothesis through the examination of the sorts of fusions that arguably emerged in the generation of composers who came to prominence in the 1990s. For instance, the music of Klaus Lang could be seen to integrate the textures and techniques of *musique concrète instrumentale* with an approach to duration and stasis more-or-less familiar from experimental musics, especially those which develop drones in a microtonal context. Likewise, Aaron Cassidy uses an extreme density of complex parametric materials which seems familiar from the music of the New Complexity to tilt at an unexpectedness, a surprise even for the composer which is closer to the more Cageian trends of experimental music. Chaya Czernowin’s music, too, utilises the sonic materials of *musique concrète instrumentale*, but with an immediacy and directness that is surprisingly like the ‘explosive’ Romanticism of Wolfgang Rihm in the late 1970s. In any case, each of these meetings — from the large festivals to the one-off concert — certainly affords the chance to expand one’s range of tastes, even if within carefully defined (and sometimes rigidly policed) demarcations. Moreover, in making these connections, I recognise clearly the experience outlined by Hodkinson: “[a]s we mingle, [...] we will all share these friends with one another, and will each broaden our base of [...] contacts.”<sup>52</sup>

It is hardly difficult to reframe another of Hodkinson’s statements to make it eminently applicable:

52. Iddon, 2013, p. 2.



53. Adapted from Hodkinson, 2002, p. 2.

Going out to concerts, speaking to others, engaging with specialist books, scores and CDs, visiting subcultural retailers, and examining compact disc inlays for several years, have provided each of us with an in-depth knowledge about what composers, musical trends, and pieces are most likely to achieve the admiration of other new music aficionados.<sup>53</sup>

54. *Ibid.*

Certainly, there is a competitive edge, and not only that expressed through the presence of actual competitions. In the context of those competitions within the subculture, though, it will be no surprise to hear them described as having “a distinct, if complex set of rules.”<sup>54</sup> This might relate to another overheard fragment of conversation, though I have heard similar comments at various new music events in various places: “Ah, so *that’s* what you have to write to get played around here!”

Moreover, it is not just the performers who are specialists. The record labels and, increasingly, publishers (both of music and of books) fall into the same category. A brief look over my own CD shelves suggests to me that I have a vastly higher proportion of CDs from labels like Kairos, Mode, NMC, Metier, Montaigne, Naïve, Col Legno, Accord, and Hat Hut than I do from the majors, at least as far as new music is concerned. Even where these are not truly independent companies (though they predominantly are), but offshoots of a major label, new music exhibits the same global network of specialist record labels as the gothic subculture Hodkinson describes. As for scores, while it is true that there remain numerous publishers with ‘a foot in both camps’ — Schott, Universal Edition, Edition Peters, Bärenreiter, Breitkopf & Härtel, to name only a few — there is similarly a vast market not only for self-publication, but also more pertinently for small-scale independent publications: Edition Wandelweiser, Lovely Music, Frog Peak, or even the University of York Music Press represent only a few. While in most countries, publication on new music remains the near-exclusive concern of the academic presses (and it is clear that fewer and fewer volumes are being produced on subjects which might genuinely be regarded as belonging to contemporary, rather than simply post-war, music), Germany notably has at least two small, specialist publishers concerned almost exclusively with new music: Pfau and Wolke. It goes without saying that specialist, minority interest is key here; at the head of Pfau is Stefan Fricke, who not only regularly broadcasts on new music for the various German radio stations, but is regularly seen in attendance at new music events across Germany. It should also be noted that most of the latest information on new music may be found not through ‘official’ channels but now through word-of-mouth, personal blogs, web forums, Facebook, Twitter, SoundCloud, and so on.

If, then, new music has indeed become subcultural, distinct both from the tradition of ‘art’ music which many still regard as its heritage and from other mainstreams — even if one may be sceptical about mainstreams as a whole, electronic music, pop music, and rock music are surely a lot more mainstream than new music is — it is a change of some significance. As a subculture, it is hard to imagine that state funding for generous commissions or large orchestras is any more justifiable for new music than it would be for punk or goth (although what use either subculture would have for commissions or orchestras is not wholly clear to me). Despite my personal hope that funding bodies will continue to see the value that new music brings to cultural life, I already see clear signs that consideration of a rather different world are urgent, if not overdue. At any rate, without falling prey to too great a lapse into the ‘heroic fallacy,’ perhaps a move to the margins will enable new music to find a new social function, critically engaging with other musics, other art forms, other cultures and subcultures. Though there is no reason to suspect any return to society, even by other means, there is cause for optimism, of a sort.

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